What is the Eastern Orthodox Church? Its History & Beliefs

Christianity.com Editorial Staff

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The Eastern Orthodox Church is somewhat unknown to the Western world, in which Protestantism and Catholicism are the predominant Christian denominations.

In the teachings of Orthodoxy, the Eastern Orthodox Church is the authentic continuation of the original church established by the Apostles shortly after the resurrection of Jesus Christ at Pentecost.

Discover more about the history, beliefs, and modern membership of Eastern Orthodoxy and its claims of being the one true apostolic Christian church.

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Overview of the Eastern Orthodox Church

The Orthodox Church views itself as the one Church established by Jesus Christ and his apostles, beginning on the day of Pentecost with the descent of the Holy Spirit in the year 33 A.D. It is also known (particularly in the modern Western world) as the Eastern Orthodox Church.

The bishops of the Orthodox Churches draw continuous succession to the very Apostles themselves, hence ultimately receiving their consecrations from our Lord Jesus Christ. All the bishops of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, regardless of their titles, are equal in their sacramental office. The numerous titles given to bishops are simply administrative or honorific in their meaning. At an ecumenical council, each bishop may cast only one vote, whether he is the Ecumenical Patriarch or an auxiliary bishop without a diocese or parish. Thus, there is no equivalent to the Roman Catholic popedom within the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

As with its Apostolic succession, the faith held by the Church is that which was given by Christ to the apostles. Nothing is added to or withheld from that foundation of faith, which was "handed once for all to the saints" (Jude 3). Throughout history, multiple heresies have troubled the Church. At those points, the Church makes dogmatic declarations (especially at ecumenical councils) outlining in new language what has always been believed by the Church, thus limiting the spread of heresy and calling to repentance those who sever apart the Body of Christ. Its primary statement of faith is the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

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History of the Eastern Orthodox Church

The following is an excerpt from Orthowiki of the history of the Eastern Orthodox Church:

Almost two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to earth and founded the Church, through His Apostles and disciples, for the salvation of man. In the years which followed, the Apostles spread the Church and its teachings and founded many churches, all united in faith, worship, and the partaking of the Mysteries (or as they are called in the West, the Sacraments) of the Holy Church.

The churches founded by the Apostles themselves include the Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Rome, and Constantinople. The Church of Alexandria was founded by St. Mark, the Church of Antioch by Sanit Paul, the Church of Jerusalem by Saints Peter and James, the Church of Rome by Saints. Peter and Paul, and Church of Constantinople by Saint Andrew. Those founded in later years through the missionary activity of the first churches were the Churches of Sinai, Russia, Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, and many others.

Each church has always had independent administration, but, with the exception of the Church of Rome, which finally separated from the others in the year 1054, are united in faith, doctrine, Apostolic tradition, sacraments, liturgies, and services. Together they constitute what is called the “Orthodox Church”, literally meaning "right teaching" or "right worship", derived from two Greek words: orthos, "right,"

and doxa, "teaching" or "worship."

The Orthodox Church proclaims to stand in direct continuity with the earliest Christian communities founded in regions of the Eastern Mediterranean by the apostles of the Lord Jesus.

Constantine and Constantinople

The destiny of Christianity in those areas was shaped by the transfer in 320 AD of the imperial capital from (Old) Rome to (New "Rome") Constantinople by Constantine I. As a consequence, during the first Eight Centuries of Church history, most major cultural, intellectual, and social developments in the Christian church also took place in that region; for instance, all ecumenical councils of that period met either in or near Constantinople.

Missionaries, coming from Constantinople, converted the Slavs and other peoples of Eastern Europe to Christianity (Bulgaria, 864; Russia, 988) and translated Scripture and liturgical texts into the vernacular languages used in the various regions. Thus, the liturgy, traditions, and practices of the church of Constantinople were adopted by all and still provide the basic patterns of contemporary Orthodoxy.

The Great Schism of Eastern and Western Christianity

Developments were not always consistent with the evolution of Western Christianity, where the bishop of Rome, or pope, came to be considered the successor of the apostle Peter and head of the universal church by divine appointment. Eastern Christians were willing to accept the pope only as first among patriarchs. This difference explains the various incidents that grew into a serious estrangement. One of the most vehement disputes concerned the filioque clause of the Nicene Creed, which the Western church added unilaterally to the original text.

The schism came slowly. The first major breach came in the Ninth century when the Pope refused to recognize the election of Photius as the patriarch of Constantinople. Photius in turn challenged the right of the papacy to rule on the matter and denounced the filioque clause as a Western innovation.

The growing disputes between East and West reached another peak in 1054 AD

when mutual anathemas were exchanged. The sacking of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade (1204 AD) intensified Eastern hostility toward the West.

Attempts at reconciliation at the councils of Lyon (1274 AD) and Florence (1438-39 AD) were unsuccessful. When the papacy defined itself as infallible (First Vatican Council, 1870 AD), the gulf between East and West grew wider. Only since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) has the movement reversed, talks are bringing serious attempts at mutual understanding.

Beliefs of the Eastern Orthodox Church

The Eastern Orthodox Church accepts as authoritative the resolutions of the seven ecumenical councils that met between 325 AD and 787 AD and established the basic teachings on the Trinity and the Incarnation. In later centuries Orthodox councils also made doctrinal determinations on Grace (1341 AD, 1351 AD) and took a stand in reference to Western teachings.

The Church continues the early traditions of Christianity, as babies receive the Eucharist and confirmation, and the episcopate and the priesthood are understood in the light of Apostolic succession. Apostolic Succession is recognized to be the continuation of the Holy Tradition by right-believing Bishops. Both married men and monks may become priests, but priests, bishops, and monks may not marry. The veneration of Mary, as Theotokos (Mother of God), is central to Orthodox Incarnational Theology, and the intercession of saints is also emphasized in the

Orthodox Holy Tradition.

After an early controversy on the subject, the Icons, of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints are now seen as visible witnesses to the fact that God has taken human flesh in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Liturgy used by the Orthodox Church has been translated from Greek into many languages. It is always sung, not just spoken. The faithful receive Holy Communion on a spoon. They are given both the consecrated bread (NIKA), and the sanctified wine from the gifts offered and sanctified at the given Divine Liturgy. Holy Communion is never taken from any "reserve."

Monasticism, which had its origins in the Christian East (Egypt, Syria, Cappadocia), has since been considered in the Orthodox Church as a prophetic ministry of men and women, showing through their mode of life the action of the Holy Spirit. The monastic republic of Mount ATHOS, Greece, is still viewed among Orthodox Christians as a center of spiritual vitality. [*Some excerpts from the Beliefs and Practices of Eastern Orthodoxy*]

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Modern Adherents of Eastern Orthodoxy

The most common estimate of the number of Orthodox Christians worldwide is

approximately 225-300 million individuals.

Other assessments, such as in *The Encyclopedia of the Developing World*, place the amount of overall Orthodox adherents in 1996 at 182 million individuals, including the following listings:

- Russian Federation: 70-80 million
- Ukraine: close to 30 million
- Romania: 20 million
- Greece: 9.5 million
- United States: close to 7 million
- Serbia and Montenegro: close to 7 million
- Bulgaria: 6 million
- Belarus: 5 million
- Kazakhstan: 4 million
- Moldavia: 3 million
- Georgia: 2.8 million
- North Macedonia: 1.2 million
- Uzbekistan: 900,000
- Poland: 800,000
- Germany: 550,000
- Australia: 480,000
- United Kingdom: 440,000
- Latvia: 400,000
- Estonia: 300,000
- France: 260,000
- Lithuania: 150,000
- Austria: about 70,000
- Switzerland: about 70,000
- Finland: 56,000

Sights and Sounds of Orthodoxy

Witness some of the scenes and sounds of the Eastern Orthodox Church with this amazing video, featuring a chant by the Valaam Monastery choir.

Article Sources:

Thomas M. Leonard. *Encyclopedia of the Developing World: Vol 3, O-Z Index*. Taylor & Francis, 2006.
Orthodox Church - OrthodoxWiki

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